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# CRISES OF SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCES: ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR PROJECTS FOR FUTURE WORK(1)

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## Abstract

This is a report on data raised through research, which has already finished, about *Identification references in adolescents*.

**Objectives:** To analyze and reflect upon the collected data, adolescents' representations about the work field and their projects for future work. To conceptualize about the crises of social significances which produce and order sense and, therefore, organize our perceptions of work through social discourses and practices which have an impact on the subjectivity of adolescents and young adults.

**Methodology:** Brief presentation of the concepts which frame the qualitative research in this area. Reading and analysis of fragments from adolescents' accounts, obtained in focal groups at different state secondary schools.

**Conclusions:** The adolescents researched portray a self-image full of uncertainty and skepticism as regards their future possibilities. The impact produced by the fall of work as an ideal of doing and being is made evident in their accounts. Only some of them link their future project with an invested and valuable activity, even if this is not associated with economic safety and wellbeing. Others present themselves as incapable to modify the state of things, which offers a field connected with consumerist values and with the idea that "you are worth what you have (in material things)".

**Key Words:** representations; adolescent; work; future projects; social significances.

We have finished our research about "The current state of identification referents in adolescents..." (2000-2002) and "Current modes of the parenting exercise in families with adolescent children" (2001-2003), which continues with the same line of work in "Families with children" (2004-2006), in La Plata and satellite cities.

We still have recurrent questions which constantly re-open in young people's daily manifestations about their possible choices, the paths they take and these paths' particular modes.

We believe that adolescents are at a key period of psychic transformation, of subjective reorganization, trying to remove themselves from childhood parental identification referents. During this passage from the familiar to the extra-familiar, society's support or references are of the outmost importance, since they play the role of indicators of

and foundations for such passage.

We ask ourselves two questions: Which are the supporting structures at this moment of social imaginary signification crisis? (Castoriadis, 1994, 1997) What role does *work* play in our adolescents, since its position as a resource that guarantees their satisfactory social positioning in society has been lost, as they face their possible futures?

We will characterize the key implicit issues within these questions: the concepts of *ideals*, *work* and *social imaginary significations*. We will go through the theoretical aspects of these issues and, finally, we will show some answers given by adolescents from the material obtained in the research mentioned above.

We believe that early *ideal* formation has a structural value in the construction of both the identification process and project. This psychic formation will become more and more complex and it will change as the subjects pass through increasingly different ties with their prime figures -whose emblems they borrow - and as they have significant encounters with others, outside the family.

The early ideal shapes the *ideal self*, an imaginary construction of completion formed by the identification images and statements of childhood prime figures, who grant existence and value to that self, true and certain (Aulagnier, 1975). The gradual encounter with reality, with the limits of the self, with various looks and voices from others will symbolically mark the subjects, proving an understanding of "*what I am not and what I lack*" and forming the ideal to aspire to: *ideal of the self*.

This new instance will become a pattern of measurement and self-evaluation, representative of the group, of the culture and its emblems and values, of what it accepts or rejects. Thus, the *ideals* are constructions which emerge from the heart of the society to which they belong, and they become founding instances of their subjectivity, through the cultural models which circulate at a particular historical point (Green, 1983; Rozitchner, 2000).

As well as opening a protective space, a place which determines anchorage, permanence and belonging to a class, to a group, to a family; the ideals embodied in figures, in models, entail and support the access to differences. They are the conditions which enable the subjects to open themselves to reality, since they represent both the known, passed down generation to generation, and the new, produced by the historical time in which they live.

All subjects make the ideals their own and give them personal meaning, thus producing the standard against which they will measure their relationships with the values and goals of the group they belong to or wish to belong.

*Work*, as a value, as well as the language through which culture and therefore the

family passes down its models and ideals to the new generation, precedes and follows the individual subjects. In the adolescent process of letting go of the parental instances, the *access to jobs* takes on a constituting value of one's identity/subjectivity, and it is also one of the foundations which accounts for adolescent resolution, partly due to the economic independence it implies. *On the psychic level*, within the sublimatory processes, it is formed into an elaboration of the function of playing as long as it has the necessary added element of pleasure so that an activity is invested (Rodulfo, 1992) and not alienating. *On the social level*, this access operates in the form of reference as to the position the subjects might occupy among others, taking into account both their own satisfaction and their role in the generation chain, as continuation of the projects started by their predecessors (heir – successor) and as providers for future generations (predecessor – donor), to whom they will pay symbolic debt with the culture that has made them.

Freud, already in 1929, in *Civilization and its discontents*, stated that all man wishes to find in life is happiness and that “*this plan to be happy imposed by the pleasure principle is unattainable*” in absolute terms. “*We try to find it in love, at work, in creations and inventions.*” And he suggests that, because it is potentially within everybody's reach, everyday work is the most effective resource to deal with discontent in culture – which brings suffering rather than happiness.

Expanding these concepts taken up by Le Fur (2002), we can point out that everyday work grants social recognition because of the outcome of such practice. The product is lost by the producer in order for it to circulate within the culture as a value. Work, then, provides identification support and symbolic value so as to face adolescent exit. This scenario is still valid for those subjects who manage to enter the work force after a variable period of training.

The discontent of current culture has become considerably more complex, not only because of the growing precariousness and reductions of work offers, but also because the intrinsic value of work has been shadowed along the crisis of social significations as a construction which give orientation, direction and meaning to society's life and the individuals who compose it.

The globalization of the market economy, the shrinking of the State-Nation which breaks down as it moves in favor of international private assets, and the hegemony of the liberal economic model are some of the key variables which have been part of the established crisis of significations which used to be key to the subject's formation: God, nation, state, citizen, goods, virtue, sin, work, justice, and so on.

The spaces left by the fragmentation and dilution of these significations are occupied, in daily life, by social discourses and practices created and sustained by the mass

media, whose offers are confusing, contradictory and paradoxical. A change in the production of subjectivity takes place then: from *citizen subjectivity* to *consumer subjectivity*, associated with the passage from the benefactor State to the technical-administrative State (Corea; Lewkowicz, 1999).

Consumption also brings social recognition but, unlike work, this does not involve subjects' products but rather an ephemeral image which must be constantly renewed. Furthermore, we need to point out that "the market and its discontents" respond to the rules of demand and supply: the market prizes or punishes an undertaking after it has taken place. Therefore, the anticipatory process which allows for the possibility to build a future labor process in adolescents either meets obstacles or becomes senseless altogether. We need to point out that the representations that they build are the inscription of the aforementioned circulating representations on the subjects.

"The subjects' acts become externalized in the social and the social becomes internalized in the subjects. But subjects are ethically responsible for what they do with the position granted by society, conditioned by time. Neither are they inexorably determined nor are they necessarily confused with the subjectivity engraved by the discourses legitimated there" (Le Fur, 2002). The writer makes reference to the instituting process mentioned by Castoriadis (1975) as a force which resists the subjects and triggers the creation of new senses and the search for new answers surpassing the possibilities presented by situations.

Going back to our research, we will exemplify these concepts with fragments taken from the productions of the adolescents who were interviewed. First, we will describe the methodology used for the collection of data.

Since we concentrate on the ways adolescents currently express themselves and are talked about, the data we work with consists of words, detailed descriptions of situations, attitudes, interactions, behaviors, beliefs and thoughts. We work with what adolescents think and say about the world today, about themselves, and about their ties with peers and with their families.

The field work was carried out in various secondary schools, both urban and suburban, in La Plata and satellite cities. We worked through the formation of focal voluntary groups. We also had interviews with parents and a discussion group with teachers. The groups were coordinated by two members of the research team, who were in charge of keeping record of the group dynamics and of making an audio recording. A system of categorization was made out of the protocols of the subsequent transcription, and a categorization system was produced after its reading and discussion. The construction took into account the recurrence of topics, the theoretical framework and the set objectives. The nodal points were established once

coincidences had been extracted, and they permitted the discrimination of different inclusion dimensions. The following categories resulted:

1. Selfimage:referencetohowtheyperceivethemselves,salientcharacteristics to define themselves
2. Relationships: how they define and describe all ties and inter-personal relationships with others
3. Perception of reality / Strategies: ways of perceiving reality in its various forms and facets, strategies used to solve the problems presented by each area
4. Project: setting expectations, desires and action plans for the post-schooling period
5. Interests, desires, dreams and inclinations
6. Worries

The fragments extracted from the interviews with the researched adolescents make two movements currently taking place in young people evident: 1. the desubjective reproduction of a feeling of *impossibility* to project a future and

2. the subjective emergence which sustains a possible future and the ambition to save the values of solidarity and respect for others as fundamentals which make this attainable.

#### **Type 1 answers:**

"I work and study. I look after a little girl. But I get really upset when lots of kids who finish high school can't go to college, or who finished school and are on the streets..."

"You make a really big effort to study, you get a degree and you can't work.You have to go and cut the grass..." "Sometimes I don't feel like going on, because now you can never be sure that you'll have a job, even if you have a degree."

"Money, like he said. Money is what matters the most. Without it you're nobody. If you only make 300 pesos, you can't even have a family. What for then? For your kids to suffer?"

#### **Type 2 answers:**

"You have to study and work, go ahead and do what you can at the beginning.You can't choose right now."

"For me, what matters the most is to have goals. You have to study or try to work, not just sit there (...) I don't know, but let me tell you, right now I'd rather make a little money doing what I like."

“The most important thing to decide is whether to do things right or wrong. When you’re little they tell you “things are like this” and you believe them. But when you’re a teenager, you start understanding, you get all the points of view and then make a decision.”

(Conversation)

- Those who go abroad do it out of necessity (...) If we all think that way, Argentina will get worse and worse. I want to do something here.
- But it’s our fault!
- It’ll be our fault in a short time, when we’re older, ... our responsibility.
- It’s true that politicians are to blame for what’s happening today. They say there are no jobs but they make tons of money. Everything is done out of convenience. But if everyone thought about what the people in power are doing, we could get together and we could change some of it...
- It’s a good thing that we’re 15 or 16 and we can see this.

As shown above, the predominant strategies fluctuate between opposites: disbelief, discouragement, going abroad, staying and saving oneself, or grouping, doing things right, all in all, taking active part.

At the same time, they seem affected by what is happening around them but have difficulty in finding a place that values and allows their expression. In that sense, in some groups (especially in the groups formed at suburban schools, where children are less used to extracurricular activities) the adolescents made explicit their satisfaction of being granted such a space to think and discuss issues about themselves, and to listen to themselves and to others.

What we pointed out shows that, in qualitative research, after a field intervention, transformations in previous conceptions operate both in the social actors and in the researchers. These transformations allow for the consideration that exchange and joint work are always opportunities to envision some of the discovery and opening to change.

## Notes

1. These concepts were included in the paper read in the Iberoamerican Congress of Orientation, “Reality as scenery: the challenge of vocational-occupational orientation”. UNLP, 24-26 September, 2003.

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